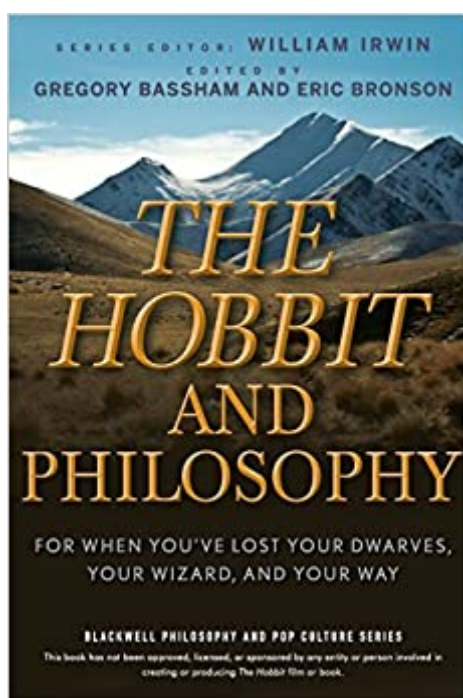


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# The Hobbit And Philosophy: For When You've Lost Your Dwarves, Your Wizard, And Your Way



## Synopsis

A philosophical exploration of J.R.R. Tolkien's beloved classic—just in time for the December 2012 release of Peter Jackson's new film adaptation, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is one of the best-loved fantasy books of all time and the enchanting "prequel" to *The Lord of the Rings*. With the help of some of history's great philosophers, this book ponders a host of deep questions raised in this timeless tale, such as: Are adventures simply "nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things" that "make you late for dinner," or are they exciting and potentially life-changing events? What duties do friends have to one another? Should mercy be extended even to those who deserve to die? Gives you new insights into *The Hobbit*'s central characters, including Bilbo Baggins, Gandalf, Gollum, and Thorin and their exploits, from the Shire through Mirkwood to the Lonely Mountain. Explores key questions about *The Hobbit*'s story and themes, including: Was the Arkenstone really Bilbo's to give? How should Smaug's treasure have been distributed? Did Thorin leave his "beautiful golden harp" at Bag-End when he headed out into the Wild? (If so, how much could we get for that on eBay?) Draws on the insights of some of the world's deepest thinkers, from Confucius, Plato, and Aristotle to Immanuel Kant, William Blake, and contemporary American philosopher Thomas Nagel. From the happy halls of Elrond's Last Homely House to Gollum's "slimy island of rock,"—this is a must read for longtime Tolkien fans as well as those discovering Bilbo Baggins and his adventures "there and back again" for the first time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

.com Author Exclusive: Bassham and Bronson Talking Hobbits, Philosophy, and Peter Jackson

Bassham: Although New Line Cinema's The Hobbit is coming after the success of The Lord of the Rings trilogy, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote The Hobbit first. Of course, Bilbo finds the magic ring, the dragon's treasure is recovered, and greed begins to grow in many of the main characters in the story. What other philosophical issues posed in The Hobbit get developed later in the The Lord of the Rings? Bronson: One of the great themes to emerge from Tolkien's Middle-earth is what it means to go on an "adventure." So much of Frodo's adventure to destroy the ring in Mordor is developed from Bilbo's adventure to slay the dragon on the Lonely Mountain. Both uncle and nephew go through serious personal changes as they confront danger. These confrontations are much more challenging than simply staying at home, enjoying some ale and a good smoke. Consistently, Tolkien tells us that change can be a good thing and that we can grow through confronting challenges and adventures. But what separates Tolkien from so many self-help authors today is his understanding that change and maturation can also be troubling. Lost innocence has its costs, and not everybody grows when confronted by pressures or adversity. Just ask Saruman or Denethor. Or Nietzsche.

Bassham: What makes The Hobbit different from The Lord of the Rings? Bronson: Well, one of the biggest differences between The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit is the tone. Right from the opening line we understand The Hobbit is meant to appeal to children. All the life and death battles in the book are meant to fascinate readers, not frighten us. I wouldn't say The Lord of the Rings is humorless, but its themes are certainly darker. And darker themes always appeal to philosophers. That said, we shouldn't be too easily seduced by the elves, dwarves, and humans that populate The Hobbit. Having fun can be serious business. The ancient Greeks understood the connection between play and education. Philosophers from Aristotle to Elmo have taught us that developing our imagination requires a sense of humor and uninterrupted leisure time. In the age of humorless machines, this theme was very important to Tolkien. He believed combatting the sour-faced goblins of Modernity was also important.

Bassham: Why do you think Tolkien's tales of Middle-earth are so popular today? Bronson: We're very attracted to magical worlds, particularly those that hearken back to simpler times and invoke classic virtues, such as courage, honor, and loyalty. So much of popular culture, from Harry Potter to The Chronicles of Narnia, owes a debt to Middle-earth. But Tolkien was also suspicious of magic if it meant manipulating the natural world for the sake of power or control. Stealth bombers and heat-seeking missiles can create that kind of "magic." Enchantment and artistry were more interesting themes to Tolkien. Creating credible and highly developed alternate worlds that delight

and instruct isn't easy. Tolkien was the master, the fountainhead of an entire genre. When works of fantasy inspire us to imagine different worlds, we see our own world with fresh eyes and perceive the wonder in everyday things. And that, I think, is a very good thing.

"The value in this approach, of course, is that these essays are simple; they are incredibly short (each runs about five pages), and they are clear and accessible." (Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts, 1 February 2015) "Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson's anthology of essays, 'The Hobbit and Philosophy', may have an overblown title, but the authors do a good job of focusing on themes like possessiveness, providence and free will, courage and decision-making." (The Times Literary Supplement, 21 December 2012)

A book full of flaws as the authors of the essays examining the philosophy of The Hobbit have little understanding of the book they were analyzing. As an example the greed of Thorin ( dragon sickness ) was harped on while if you read The Hobbit the point is that dwarves, elves, men and even Bilbo all had dragon sickness and Bilbo was the only one who found the cure. Since many conclusions were reached by not understanding the content of the book being examined, many errors were made. There were a couple of the essays that were of interest. This book was a letdown from the same authors work, The Philosophy of The Lord of the Rings which was a good book. I do not recommend this book.

I adore these "and philosophy" books. This was another great addition to my collection. Check it out.

Great read for lovers of Tolkien...

I love the Hobbit and Philosophy so this book was delightful to me. Anyone who has the same tastes would enjoy it.

Probably because most people associate "philosophy" with ponderous tomes, the editors of The Hobbit And Philosophy have maintained a lighthearted, informal, and colloquial approach throughout this enjoyable compilation. In a series of 17 chapters, the "most excellent and audacious contributors," all of whom are unimpeachably scholarly, identify and expound on the many philosophical twists and turns to be found in The Hobbit. I enjoyed every chapter, especially Chapter 8's discussion of "just war," the examinations of Tao and Buddhist parallels that are to be found in

The Hobbit in Chapters 2 and 3, and Chapter 15's discussion of Providence and Free Will. There will never be an end to exploring the riches of JRR Tolkien's worlds, and it is fortunate that the editors chose to keep this compilation as informal and approachable as possible. Now many who read and enjoy Tolkien's writings have an accessible yet thorough introduction that will help them learn to identify some hidden depths that they might otherwise have overlooked.

A fuller version of this review can be found at [...] Bassham and Bronson's new volume, *The Hobbit and Philosophy*, contains a collection of seventeen essays that reflect on hobbits as a vehicle for exploring a variety of important philosophical questions such as the value of art, the concept of just war, the importance of play and playfulness. The book is thus a reference point for philosophical inquiry for those who are more familiar with Tolkien than with Kierkegaard, Kant, or Rene des Cartes. The essays are as likely to launch into a paragraph or three about Plato, Augustine, Thoreau, or Aquinas as they are a paragraph about Thorin, Bilbo, or Gollum. But ultimately they all do find their way back to Middle-earth, and those who know all the mountains and forests of Middle-earth may suddenly gain a new understanding of Plato. The contributors of the essays are primarily philosophers writing about Tolkien rather than literary scholars (though there are a few English or Humanities Professors mixed in.) As the title suggests, and as one will quickly guess from the voice and tone of the opening essay "The Adventurous Hobbit" (by Bassham), there is a certainly whimsical feel to the book and to its approach. The contributors all seem to love both philosophy and J.R.R. Tolkien, and they also seem to take both topics seriously. The seriousness does not lead to dullness or a dry esoteric approach; rather it leads to something like playfulness, joy, energy, excitement (the degree to which these elements appear varying from contributor to contributor). The strength of an edited collection like this, and also its weakness, is that the work as a whole has only a vague cohesiveness centered on the unifying topic--albeit a well defined topic. The individual authors have their own unique voices and approaches, and they address a variety of topics. So there isn't the same sense of flow from chapter to chapter as there would be in a well-crafted book-length treatment by a single author (such as Kreeft's book). It is almost certain that in a collection with this many contributors and topics, a reader will find some essays whose topics are uninteresting, or where they don't appreciate the author's approach. And the interesting thing is that for ten different readers (and, I would guess, for ten different reviewers), it's likely to be ten different subsets of chapters that are the unappreciated ones, and ten different chapters that are the favorites. But that is also the strength and advantage such of a collection. You don't have to read it in order. You can jump from chapter to chapter, picking them out based on the title or topic. You

don't have to read it all, either. If you start an essay and find it uninteresting, you can skip to the next one; since each essay is separate and self-contained, skipping one won't keep you from understanding the next one. My favorite contributions were David O'Hara's essay on "Why Hobbits Like to Play and Why We Should To", and the essay "The Glory of Bilbo Baggins" by Charles Taliaferro and Craig Lindahl-Urben. In some cases I found I was not in full agreement with the interpretation of Tolkien; it seemed that the authors in making a particular philosophical point didn't do completely justice to Tolkien's work, stretching some passage beyond what I thought it could bear in their interpretation, or just missing out important other passages. Such was my opinion of one or two sections of David Kyle Johnson's essay on "Tolkien's Just War", Philip Tallon's essay "'Pretty Fair Nonsense': Art and Beauty in The Hobbit", and Randall M Jensen's essay "Some Hobbit's Have All the Luck." But even those essays were valuable contributions to the whole and were interesting, insightful, and led me to think through my own understandings both of Tolkien's works and of the underlying philosophical question being explored. That is to say, if critiqued as essays whose primary point was scholarly analysis of Tolkien, I might have found them coming up short. But as works that introduce me to aspects of philosophical inquiry, and to the works of the world's great philosophers, by connecting to a book I do know very well, the collections works very well.

I am a huge fan of Tolkien, the Hobbit, and the Lord of the Rings. I am not particularly interested in philosophy. However, due to that first fact, I decided to give The Hobbit and Philosophy a try. I was particularly enticed by the subtitle: "For when you've lost your dwarves, your wizard, and your way." I enjoyed this book quite a bit. Some of the articles were, I confess, a bit dull for my tastes, but others were fascinating. The essays gave me something to think about, regarding life, Tolkien, and The Hobbit. One of my favorite essays was "Pretty Fair Nonsense" by Philip Tallon. It includes a Tolkien quote I was not familiar with. "Tolkien was similarly unconcerned with whether modernist critics would judge his fantasy writings to be nonsense. Tolkien invented and endlessly elaborated his world of Middle-earth with no sense that it could ever be anything more than a private amusement. 'I am a very serious person and cannot distinguish between private amusement and duty,' Tolkien writes, adding, 'I work only for private amusement, since I find my duties privately amusing.'" I like that a lot - it makes me admire Tolkien even more! Another essay, "Hobbitus Ludens" by David L. O'Hara, contained a C.S. Lewis quote that caught my attention. (I'm no fan of Lewis, so I've not read much that he has said.) "The Hobbit, though very unlike Alice [in Wonderland], resembles it in being the work of a professor at play." I love Alice, and I'd never thought of Alice and the Hobbit as being

connected in this way. And I enjoy the image of both authors "at play." Another essay I especially enjoyed was "There and Back Again" by Joe Kraus, which discusses the Hobbit in context with William Blake's Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. If you are a fan of the Hobbit, I think you'll find some essays to enjoy in The Hobbit and Philosophy.

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